

Academic Women's Online Learning Experience during COVID-19 Pandemic in Turkish Higher Education Institutions

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to explore academic women's online learning experience during COVID-19 pandemic in Turkish Higher Education Institutions (HEI). In this study, the traditional literature review method has been used to put an overview of the current situation (see Baumeister and Leary, 1997). Traditional literature review provide a comprehensive, critical, and objective analysis of the current knowledge or facts on a specific topic. In exploring the academic women's online learning experience also, document analysis using the Success Case Method (SCM) (see Yin, 2018) has been undertaken in this study. First, the situation of academic women in Turkish universities is examined. Then, the Case Study University (CSU) is chosen as the research site because it had made great progress in online learning experience during COVID-19 pandemic. The case study university has a supportive organizational climate for open and distance education. As a conclusion, major initiatives that effect the effective online learning experience are explained. Higher education institutions need to reshape, revise and integrate new learning models, and new technologies into the current programs and curriculums.

Keywords: Academic Women, Turkish Higher Education Institutions, Gender Equality, Online Learning Experience, COVID-19 Pandemic

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to explore academic women's online learning experience during COVID-19 pandemic in Turkish Higher Education Institutions (HEI). Following the discussion on the situation of academic women in Turkish universities, we examined the current statistics of academic women.

The COVID-19 pandemic, which started to show its effects as of December 2019 and started to show itself fully within the first quarter of 2020. It is known that before the COVID-19 pandemic, a similar situation occurred in history. The polio epidemic had been in 1937 in Chicago, USA. In this incident, which is similar to COVID-19 pandemic, but with a more localized one, the radio stations in the city broadcast specific courses on certain days of the week for children who could not go school due to the polio outbreak, ensuring the continuation of educational activities (Foss, 2020). It had great negative effects on the workforce. Especially women were affected negatively during this period. Many women have become unemployed or have been crushed by the workload at home with the transition system into home office. Akkerman et al. 2020 mentioned the COVID-19 crisis as a career shock.

The COVID-19 pandemic process has been a breaking point in the field of education. Turkish Higher Education Council published a COVID-19 information note to begin online education for universities on 13.03.2020. Although the process challenges for everyone, from a more specific perspective, it has even more challenging aspects for women.

This epidemic case and the current pandemic reveal that such situations can always happen. For educational processes, how ready we are for such situations in terms of institutions, learners, teachers, families, and the learning environment is a critical point. The

necessity of creating a new concept has arisen because the sudden shift and online learning process experienced with the declaration of the pandemic are different from each other and this is called “Emergency Remote Teaching (ERT)” (Hodges et al., 2020).

The transition to online education has involved the use of multiple processes such as preparations, different levels of readiness, infrastructure and technical inequalities, and adaptation of contents to online education. Of course, these kinds of issues caused this pandemic online experience been called Emergency Distance Education (ERT) as an alternative to online learning (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020).

Comparing the ERT, with online learning or calling it online learning reinforces the “weak” situation, which is a general perception of the online learning method. Whereas online learning as a whole includes instructional design, planning, development, implementation, and assessment and evaluation activities. However, the experience in ERT enabled the teacher, who is the narrator, and the learner, who is the listener, to meet in a virtual video conference tool instead of the classroom. Therefore, accepting that the ERT is different from online learning is important for a successful online learning process and eliminating negative perceptions (Hodges, Moore, Lockee, Trust & Bond, 2020).

It is not easy to say that online learning is equal to face-to-face learning, but researchers have shown that if the requirements of online learning are met, it can be as effective as face-to-face education (Herman & Banister, 2007; Nortvig, Peterson & Balle, 2019; Paul & Jefferson, 2016). Even if many studies show online learning can be as effective as face-to-face education, there is a tendency for a negative opinion and this is one of the barriers to online learning (Muilenburg & Berge, 2005; Keengwe & Kidd, 2010).

Somehow most people have experienced online learning during the pandemic. In addition, due to the sudden shift transition process was not successfully ended for the most of the cases. For creating effective, and successful online learning environment to be as much as equal to face-to-face learning, there are some key dimensions. These dimensions have been studied in several review types of research (Nortvig, Peterson & Balle, 2019; Bozkurt & Zawacki-Richter, 2021; Martin, Sun & Westine, 2020).

The measures taken during the pandemic have affected family dynamics, such as family income, interpersonal relations, social activities, education of the kids, and many more that created consequences for women. Because of lockdown or the change of working conditions, like home office, many women had to continue their working lives with their families at home which can be sometimes considered a positive situation, but when the kids are small and continue their education online at home or elderly parents at home whom they should take care of, it can create a conflict between working life and the family life for women (Rozenberg et.al. 2020). Women’s unpaid work at home has increased because of school closures and needs of old people under their care.

During the COVID-19 crisis, many national and international institutions published their research on the impacts of this period on women. In the academic world, there are hundreds of articles and books about the challenges, which women faced during the pandemic. According to the report of UN Women, it is declared that men and women are experiencing the pandemic period in different ways according to the places they live and they work. UN Secretary-General António Guterres mentions in the policy brief, the impact of COVID-19 on women “Early data indicates that the mortality rates from COVID-19 may be higher for men. But the pandemic is having devastating social and economic consequences for women and girls” (UN WOMEN, 2020).

2. Research Methodology

In this study, the traditional literature review method has been used to put an overview of the current situation (see Baumeister and Leary, 1997). Traditional literature reviews provide a comprehensive, critical, and objective analysis of the current knowledge or

facts on a specific topic. In exploring the academic women's online learning experience also, document analysis using the Success Case Method (SCM) (see Yin, 2018) has been undertaken in this study. First, the situation of academic women in Turkish universities is examined. Then, the Case Study University (CSU) is chosen as the research site because it had made great progress in online learning experience during COVID-19 pandemic. The case study university has a supportive organizational climate for open and distance education.

3. The Situation of Turkish Academic Women

Turkish academic women were accepted to the Faculty of Higher Economics and Commerce School for the first time in the 1932-1933 academic year (Çakır and Arslan, 2018: 266). During 32 years between 1914 and 1946, the number of academic woman in universities and colleges increased rapidly, and the rate of academic woman was found to be 13.9 percent in 1946 (Köker, 1988: 123). By 2024, this rate has reached to 46 percent. It is predicted that the rate of academic woman may exceed 50 percent in 2030.

Türkiye has 208 Higher Education Institutions - 129 Public Universities, 75 Foundation Universities and 4 Foundation Vocational Schools currently. Women comprise 46.4 percent of academics in Türkiye in 2024. Their representation as full professors is 34.3, percent as associate professors is 41,8 percent, as assistant professors is 47,4 percent and as research assistants is 53.8 percent (<https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>) (Accessed: 29 May 2024).

Table 1: Percentage of female teaching staff by academic title in Türkiye 2024

Academic Title	Public Universities Percentage (%)	Foundation Universities Percentage (%)	Total Percentage (%)
Professors	33,7	34,7	34,3
Associate professors	39,8	48,7	41,8
Assistant professors	44,8	53,4	47,4
Research assistants	52,1	62,2	53,8

Source: Turkish Higher Education Council Statistics (YÖK). (<https://istatistik.yok.gov.tr/>) (Access Date: 29 May 2024).

The ratio of Turkish female professors is much higher than the EU-25 average (Atay, 2023). The uniqueness of academia and academic roles is the flexibility of work place and work hours. This often serves as an incentive to motivate women to opt for an academic career (Baruch, 2013).

A combination of historical, social and economic factors may explain the higher representation of Turkish women in professorial positions. Women entered academic employment through a set of principles –secularism, republicanism, populism, statism, reformism and nationalism- introduced by Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, the founder of Turkish Republic (Healy, Özbilgin and Aliefendioğlu, 2005:252-3). Zeytinoglu (1999) and Kandiyoti (1997) noted that academic careers were historically and socially constructed and sex-typed as “safe” and “proper” choices for graduate women in Türkiye. Women were encouraged to take up Professional employment, as opposed to entrepreneurial or commercial careers, as it was considered harmonious with the potent image of “respectful Turkish woman”. This ideology effectively demarcated women’s careers in “safe”, “secure” and “esteemed” forms of Professional employment (Healy, Özbilgin and Aliefendioğlu, 2005:253).

Despite the high representation of women in the professoriate in Türkiye, women are under-represented in senior management, especially at Rector/Vice-Rector and at Dean levels (Neale and Özkanlı, 2010; Özkanlı, 2010; Yıldız, 2018; Kalkın, Erdem & Tikici, 2015; Korkmaz, 2016; Yükseköğretimde Kadın Liderliği Çalıştayı, 2012:10)). The percentage of

female Rectors was 5.3 percent in 2007 and increased to 32.5 percent in 2021. Women comprise 9 percent of Rectors in Turkish universities in 2024. Currently, women comprise 14 percent of Vice Rectors and 17 percent of Deans in Turkish universities (Turkish Higher Education Management Information System, 2024).

Özgüç (1998) suggested that traditionally male graduates pursued career opportunities offering better financial prospects outside the university sector, and therefore became increasingly disinterested in academic careers. This has resonance with Reskin & Roos' (1990) gender queues argument that men, due to changing market conditions, may leave the competition for certain jobs and women take their place in the queue, leading to the gendering of previously contested jobs (Özbilgin & Healy, 2004:361). Newly graduated men are turning to non-academic areas that can provide access to more financial opportunities than academic career (Mun & Jung, 2018).

Table 2: Percentage of female Rectors in Turkish Public and Foundation Universities (2024)

Type Of University	Number of Rectors			Proportion of Rectors (%)
	Female	Male	Total	
Public	6	123	129	% 4
Foundation	14	61	75	% 19
Total	20	184	204	% 9

Source: The Turkish Higher Education Council, 2024. (<https://yok.gov.tr>) (Access Date: 29 May 2024).

According to Atay (2023) increased support from the university such as mentoring for leadership roles, improved childcare/elderly care facilities, positive segregation and quotas may increase the number of female managers in Turkish universities. Woman-friendly policies to improve work/family balance require the development of democratic family life and equal sharing of responsibilities. Özkanlı et.al 2009 found that increasing the number of women with the help of equal representation policies facilitates changes in the masculine symbolic image of management.

4. Theoretical Framework

During this pandemic term online education, which is not easy for all stakeholders involved in the process - student, teacher, administrator, and parents - many contextual and personal adaptation problems have been experienced at the higher education level as well as at every education level (Biwer et al., 2021; Flores et al., 2022; García-Morales et al., 2021). To overcome these problems in this process, institutions tried to make the process more efficient by taking various measures such as training of instructors and technical support (Ilgaz et al., 2023).

Although the process poses challenges for everyone, from a more specific perspective, it has even more challenging aspects for women. Although this situation is similar in terms of student and academic roles, it was also the subject of research before the pandemic (Stone et al., 2019). Gouthro (2006) stated that women are at a disadvantage due to the social, domestic and childcare responsibilities. For students, online learning opportunities are seen as an opportunity to achieve equality in terms of the right to access education. Of course, in this process, higher education institutions have important roles like sharing demographic data of students, sustaining engagement, building flexibility, keeping course content and assessment tasks relevant, providing communication with peers and ensure to access technical support easily (Stone et al., 2019).

While these are the suggestions in the literature about being an adult female student in online learning environments, the situation also poses similar difficulties for an academic

woman. Online learning is one of the most effective methods because it is a process carried out in a fully motivated way (willingly) by all stakeholders, after the necessary instructional design studies are planned. However, since it has turned into a method that everyone must use regardless of whether they are ready for this situation during the pandemic period, the process has been planned in an unusual way and has become difficult (Ilgaz, 2022).

Makura (2022) investigated the "working from home" phenomenon during the pandemic period through interviews with ten academic women within the scope of South African Higher Education. It has been found that female academics' perceptions of the impact of the home environment on their academic activities are mostly negative, and that working from home limits their ability to perform official duties and tasks. Additionally, most participants stated that their workload had increased significantly.

Nurumal et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review focusing on professional satisfaction and perception of female academics during the pandemic period. The adaptation, job security, employee well-being and satisfaction dimensions of female academics in the process were investigated before and after the pandemic. In the study, it was found that work-family conflict, techno-stress, flexible working hours, unbalancing personal and work life issues and anxiety dimensions affected job satisfaction.

Güneş Peshcke et al. (2023) examined women's health, employment, family life and various social problems for women during the pandemic period in Türkiye and found that the workload of the women has increased at home and at work. During lockdown, some women devoted themselves to cleaning their houses, and some started cleaning not out of necessity, but as a hobby or in order not to be idle. Even if this is the case, it did not stop women to be less active and gain fat. Because of not being able to leave their confined spaces, women started to cook more and eat more. They experienced role conflict during pandemic.

5. Ankara University Case Study

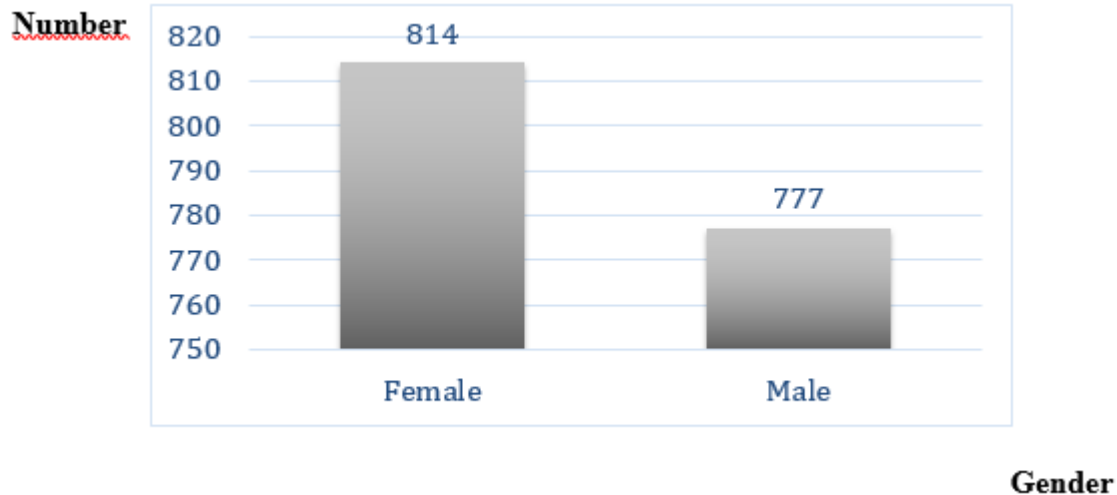
The Case Study University (CSU) is Ankara University. It is chosen as the research site because it had made great progress in online learning experience during COVID-19 pandemic. The case study university has a supportive organizational climate for open and distance education. During pandemic time, Ankara University has been used Moodle as a learning management system (LMS). Moodle is one of the most popular and flexible open-source, content and learning management system in the world. As one of the biggest universities in Turkey, the capacity of the LMS is highly large. During pandemic 68.578 students, 2.043 instructors used the LMS, and it consisted of 13.438 courses. All the courses (undergraduate, graduate, and in-service courses) have been conducted via our own LMS. Instructor could conduct their lessons both synchronously and asynchronously within this learning management system. In this way, instructors and students were able to continue interaction for their courses. This transition from face-to-face to online learning was not an easy process. To provide a smooth and easy transition, 35 system usage guidelines, tutorial videos and live sessions conducted (Ilgaz et al., 2023).

These documents consist of LMS usage, virtual classroom usage, various instructional teaching methods, assessment and evaluation activities, and interactive activity development processes.

In addition to all of these support documents and tutorials, an Online Instructor Certificate Program has been conducted synchronously. 578 academics attended to the program. The main topics of this program consists «Information communication technologies, learning environments, online learning, instructional design, learning and content management systems, virtual classrooms, content development, information visualization, assessment and evaluation, digital information resources, management of rights in the digital environment, ethics and integrity» (Ilgaz et al., 2023).

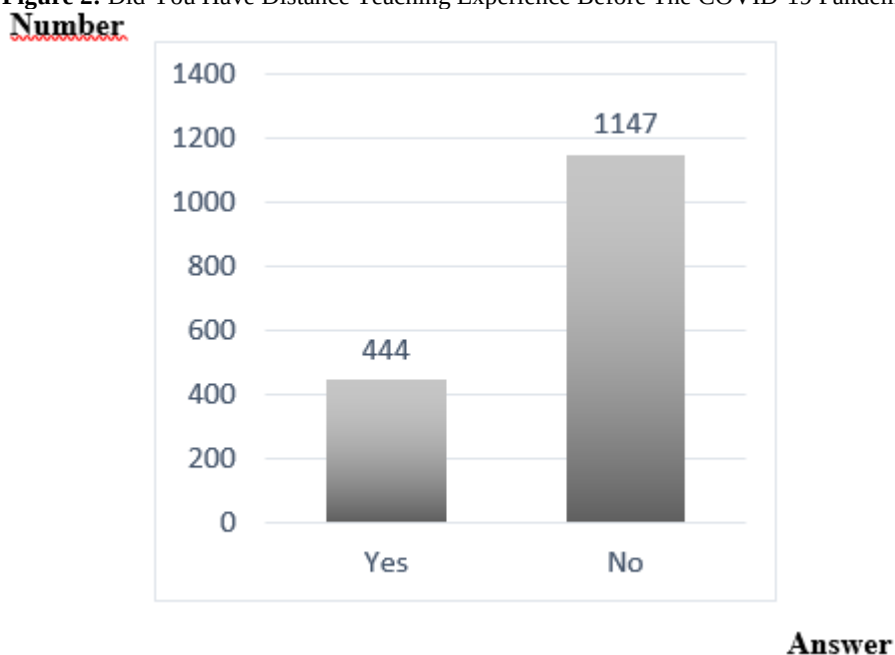
Emergency remote teaching was an exceptional situation for all levels of education. Therefore, the gender, previous experience, and instructors' device preferences can be important during this process. During this pandemic transition process to have a better idea about the instructors' situation, a few questions sent to them. Based on their responses participants' gender data has been presented in Figure 1. The instructors who responded to the questionnaire, %51.1 female and %48.8 male.

Figure 1: Participants Gender



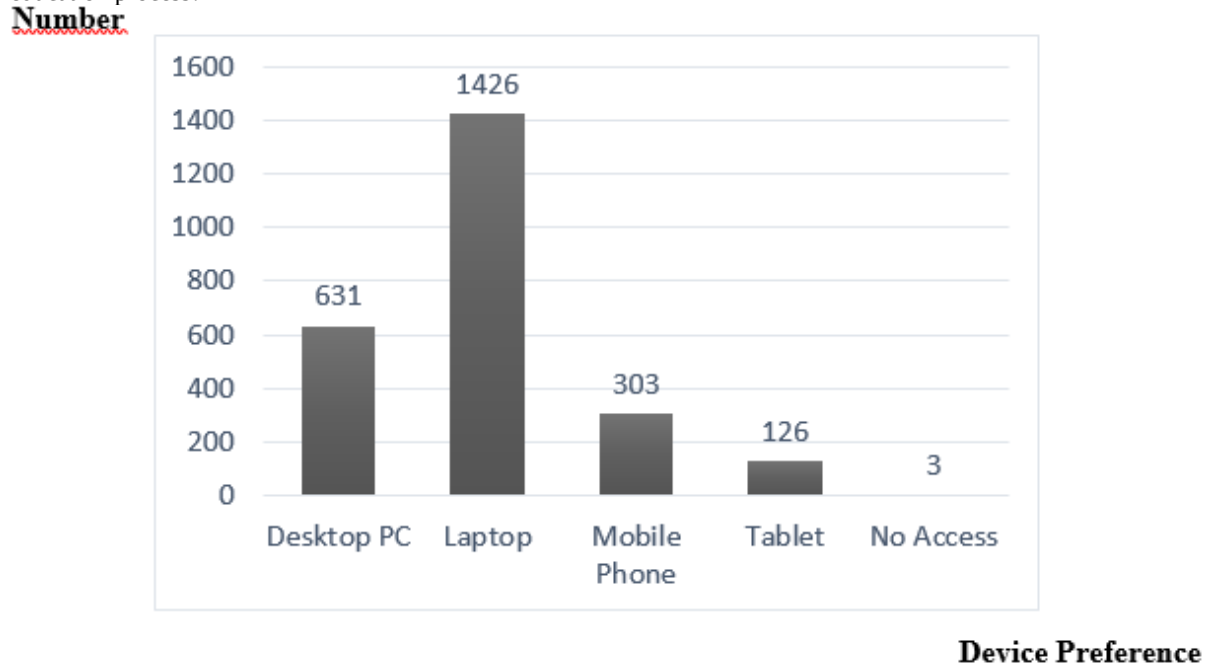
Teaching online is a completely different activity with different responsibilities, so the previous online teaching experience is not important information. According to the responses, it is seen that %27.9 of the participants have previously experience on online teaching. In addition to that, %72.9 of the participants had no online teaching experience before pandemic. Instructors' online teaching experience has been presented in Figure 2.

Figure 2: Did You Have Distance Teaching Experience Before The COVID-19 Pandemic?



The technical equipment and infrastructure another important factor for an effective online teaching process. So, the instructors' device preferences have been presented in Figure 3. The most preferred one is laptop (%57.29), secondly desktop PC (%25.35), and then mobile phones (%12.1) and tablets (%5).

Figure 3: Device preferences to access the learning management system/virtual classrooms during the distance education process?



6. Conclusion

It is seen that online learning is used in educational institutions at all levels, albeit in different models, with the detection of implementation errors and the spread of good practice examples (Ilgaz, 2022). Ankara University is a success case study for online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, because the university was ready for this pandemic disruption. Educational activities are vital and cannot be discarded. At the same time, it has been seen that rapid digital transformation is inevitable for online learning processes to be effective and successful. Ankara University has had the chance to progress with the momentum gained from this transformation, as it initiated or accelerated this transformation.

If the university system is serious about increasing the proportion of women at the senior management level and benefiting from the diversity of experience and talent, the barriers will need to be addressed. Some strategies are suggested at the final report of Council of Europe activities to increase the representation of academic women in university senior management (Council of Europe, 2023). Implementation of affirmative action policies to improve the conditions of family-work conciliation by developing the protection of women in workplace and by promoting a more involved fatherhood in the family is very important. The improvement of childcare facilities at the workplace and the enhancement of leave arrangements for academic women, changes in the gender structure of the labour market may also be suggested. For future studies, we plan to explore the subject with different dimensions, different case studies and comparatively with other countries.

As a conclusion, major initiatives that effect the effective online learning experience are explained. Higher education institutions need to reshape, revise and integrate new learning models, and new technologies into the current programs and curriculums.

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